

Proposal for a National Centre of Food Education

Introduction

Over the past 6 months Groundwork NI has been investigating the possibility of developing a 'National Centre for Food Education' within Belfast. This has emerged from our ongoing work to develop a healthy living centre at Colin Glen, as well as our engagement with communities & other partners on 'grow your own' and community gardening initiatives over the past number of years.

The overall aim is to develop a social enterprise centre of excellence which provides a regional resource for learning about growing, cooking and eating seasonal, organic and nutritious food, and which promotes a health & wellbeing agenda. We also see real opportunities for it to be a focal point for multi-cultural engagement & employability programmes.

Discussions initially focused on engaging Queen's University with conversations around academic backing for the concept, student & departmental input & the potential use of sites within the University area. These conversations have now been widened to include Belfast City Council & a number of community/voluntary sector organisations active in South Belfast. We view this proposal as a pilot for Belfast, providing city wide benefits & added value and acting as a 'hub' for the network of growing initiatives across the city. We are currently in the process of delivering a healthy living centre in the Colin community of West Belfast in conjunction with Colin Neighbourhood Partnership, and would see this as a potential satellite within the network, along with other sites such as Woodvale.

<http://greenshootsbelfast.wordpress.com/plans-for-our-new-healthy-living-centre-community-food-hub/>

Proposal

The proposal is very much a concept stage, with details site dependent, but it is envisaged that the following will be key elements:

- A small sustainable building which would be used as an administration base, a place to deliver training in the 'grow, cook, eat' ethos, and which would become a local food hub where the community could come and purchase affordable locally grown healthy food, ideally with a community cafe creating much needed local employment.
- Within the project an 'edible landscape' would be developed, with the aim of creating a working food garden where the local community can get involved in volunteering, undertaking accredited training and hobby courses in relation to

the 'grow, cook, eat' ethos. An educational children's garden, and an area for community events is also proposed.

It is envisaged that the project will impact on a number of key policy agendas:

Health and well being

- This project would act to inspire the community to get physically active and produce a proportion of their own food in an organic, seasonal, non intensive manner. The community would benefit from the physical activity, the mental health benefits of being outdoors gardening and also the nutritional benefits of consuming their own quality food produced in a local context.
- Peer reviewed science has now scientifically demonstrated what we always knew. That having your hands in the soil is good for you. Tiny micro organisms and bacteria found naturally in the soil when in contact with our bodies act as natural antidepressants stimulating the production of serotonin. The natural chemical that makes us happy!
<http://www.hortmag.com/blogs/gardening-blog/dirt-can-make-you-happy>
- There are health epidemics on the horizon. Diabetes, cancers, heart disease and obesity. Growing and eating organic, seasonal, nutritious food has a massive part to play in tackling these issues.
- There are opportunities to use scientifically proven horticultural therapies such as mindfulness to improve mental health. This would continue the Mindfulness work that Groundwork NI is presently delivering through 'Active Belfast'.

Economic development & employability

- Groundwork NI is keen to play our part in stimulating a sustainable local economy creating employment for the local community. As such our proposal would be for GWNI to lease land and establish a social enterprise operating on a not for profit basis in partnership with community stakeholders.
- The aim would be to generate income from the community cafe, via educational visits from local schools and community groups, through vocational training and hobby courses, by growing high value food at the site for sale to restaurants and markets in Belfast and by organising community events at the project.
- Groundwork NI believes that a project such as this has the potential to help develop a new local food economy in the city.
- Young adults not in education, training or employment could benefit from vocational training at this project and go on to develop new local food businesses strengthening and developing our local food economy in Belfast and beyond.
- Groundwork NI would hope to continue to develop our employability work at this project continuing the legacy of current projects such as the Department

of Employment and Learning / ESF funded 'Green Jobs Programme'.
<http://www.groundwork.org.uk/Sites/northernireland/news/green-jobs-team-north-west>

Good relations and multiculturalism

- Belfast is becoming more ethnically diverse every week. South Belfast is the epicentre for that new cultural diversity. Many new arrivals from all over Europe, Africa and Asia are making their homes in communities in South Belfast. This new era offers us an incredible opportunity to engage with our new arrivals. What better way to engage with all than through food?
- Laganbank ward is the most ethnically diverse ward in Northern Ireland.
- This project would aim to bring the diverse multi cultural community in South Belfast and beyond together to tackle racism and intolerance by growing together, breaking bread together and sharing our food cultures.
- A project such as this would encourage people to come together and share their food cultures. How to grow it, how to cook it and then coming together to eat it!
- This project would also focus on building community whilst also reconnecting the community with where their food comes from and how it is produced. Alongside bringing people together from diverse cultural backgrounds we would continue to focus on more traditional cross community work, with great opportunities for a high level of intergenerational work.
- A full social calendar of family friendly community events celebrating the diverse multi cultural community of South Belfast would be offered throughout the year.
- Groundwork NI has a proven track record of delivering successful 'Shared space' community projects such as the PEACE III funded 'Colin Allotments' project.

<http://greenshootsbelfast.wordpress.com/about/>

<http://www.groundwork.org.uk/Sites/northernireland/news/green-light-for-colin-healthy-living-centre>

Education & learning

- Groundwork NI would offer a full annual calendar of educational food, horticultural and environmental courses, with both accredited training and hobby courses.
- There is potential to develop the project as a hub of learning and education in terms of food growing for the Belfast City Council community gardens and allotments network.

- There are significant opportunities to link with academic research at Queen's University and to engage with the wider student body who live & learn within the South Belfast area.

Potential Partners

Groundwork NI recognises that a project like this can only be successful if a collaborative approach is taken to both development & delivery. As such we have identified & had initial conversations with a number of potential partners.

- Exploratory conversations have been held with Belfast City Council officers & members. Our proposal relates directly to the new Belfast City Council 'Growing Communities' policy. The proposal also relates to Council policy around education, training, health (physical and mental), well being and nutrition, economic development, sustainability and equality.
- Queen's University Belfast is also very interested in becoming involved in this project. Key staff from several faculties have expressed great interest and in involving their students at undergraduate, post graduate and research levels. Areas that have been discussed include food security, sustainable architecture, planning, urban regeneration, environmental sustainability and well being.
- The Northern Ireland Council for Ethnic Minorities (NICEM) are also very keen to be involved as partners. They would bring skills and experience in terms of race relations and community development.
- The Belfast Sustainable Food Network (part funded by Belfast City Council) is very supportive. We view this proposal as having complementary aims to the Belfast SFN i.e. addressing health in-equalities, food poverty, promotion of locally sourced seasonal food.
- Other potential partners that the proposal has been discussed with & who are keen to be involved include:
 - Common grounds Cafe
 - South Belfast Roundtable on Racism
 - Mediation NI
 - Home plus (charity working with new arrivals and asylum seekers)

Potential Locations

Groundwork NI believes that the South Belfast / Queen's University area is the most appropriate location in Belfast for a regional centre such as this, providing an accessible city centre location, proximity to academia & a location with a hugely diverse community .

Initially suggestions include the Belfast City Council owned land adjacent to the Botanic Gardens and QUB Physical Education Centre on the Stranmillis